

## Reflections on a Solar Eclipse<sup>1</sup>

**By Gordon Arthur**

On August 21, 2017, just after 9 am, Pacific Time, I was standing on the Capitol Mall in Salem, OR, waiting for what has been called the most accessible solar eclipse in a century to begin. I did not have long to wait: a few minutes later, a dark patch appeared on the top right of the sun as the moon began its transit. Soon it was obvious, through eclipse viewers, that things were under way. I was not alone, although the mall had not yet filled up completely. This was no surprise, but what was a surprise was that I was flanked on both sides by people I had never met, but who lived less than 10 miles away from me in Vancouver, BC, 350 miles to the north. I suggested we put up a Canadian flag....

There was a palpable sense of energy and excitement that built up as totality approached, probably helped by the fact that we had cloudless, blue skies and every chance of a superb view. Shortly before totality, the skies began to darken and the cheering began as the sun's light vanished and we saw a magnificent corona for 1 minute and 56 seconds. Then the sun's light flared as we reached third contact, and the daylight began to return. Moments later, we had full sunlight, and just over an hour after that, it was all over.



The 2017 eclipse from Madras, OR (photo credit: NASA)

It was a very different story the first time I saw a solar eclipse. That was in Penzance, on the south-western tip of England, on August 11, 1999. On that occasion, the weather was very different: it was cloudy, and while there were breaks in the cloud, it started raining about 10 minutes before totality, so I never saw the corona. However, since I was on the coast, I could see the sun reflecting off the waves out to sea and there were lots of seagulls around, getting confused and alarmed by the sudden dark. Neither happened in Salem, because there were no birds around and I was more than 50 miles inland. The drop in temperature was also much more noticeable in Penzance, but the rain probably contributed to that. However, each experience contributed something the other did not.

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Dr. Larry Downing for raising some of the issues I address in this article in a group e-mail on August 23, 2017.



The 1999 eclipse from Penzance, UK (photo credit: A Shade Greener)

Of course, this raises the question, why do it? To get to Penzance, I took a charter train that left London's Paddington Station at 1:35 am. To get to Salem, I drove from Vancouver to Portland, spent part of the night in a hotel, and then set off at 3:45 am to ensure I beat the traffic to Salem. The journey back to London was far easier, however: I just got back on the train and let the driver worry about getting me home. Getting into Salem proved much easier than getting out again: I stayed for lunch, but then hit a 40-mile backup that stretched almost all the way to Portland. When I got there, I hit the afternoon peak (and the peak in Vancouver, WA), before encountering a series of traffic jams that left me stranded overnight in southern Washington State (however, there are worse places to be stranded than the Holiday Inn...). I eventually got home almost a day later than planned (and according to the Canada Border Services Agency, I was far from alone in this). Given that neither eclipse lasted more than three minutes, some might see all this effort as a touch obsessive.

I had several motivations for going:

1. My bachelor's degree is in physics, and despite not applying for the available physics with astrophysics option, I have long had an interest in astronomy.
2. I felt that I missed out in 1999 due to the weather, and I wanted a second chance to see the corona.
3. I knew from what I have seen on TV that the full effect of an eclipse is quite a spectacle. Based on my experience now, I do not think watching it on TV comes close to doing it justice.
4. At least on land, this is a comparatively rare opportunity. With most eclipses taking place at sea, most people, even those willing and able to travel, get few opportunities to see eclipses.

It was more than just curiosity, however. It was a chance to see one of the glories of nature, or, I would say, the glories of God. Undoubtedly there was a sense of fascination, and a sense of awe, at the majesty of it all. It was a chance to step out

of the routine and, for a moment, to contemplate the wonders that surround us. I left Oregon tired, but uplifted.

The cover image for this issue reflects the public interest in this recent eclipse. Article 12, "Space Spiritual Dimension," by Madhu Thangavelu, is also relevant. KSI will include this subject in its presentation at ISDC in Los Angeles in 2008 and in our future work.

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